LEICESTER GAZETTE

Leicestershire's independent newspaper | Proud to be a co-op

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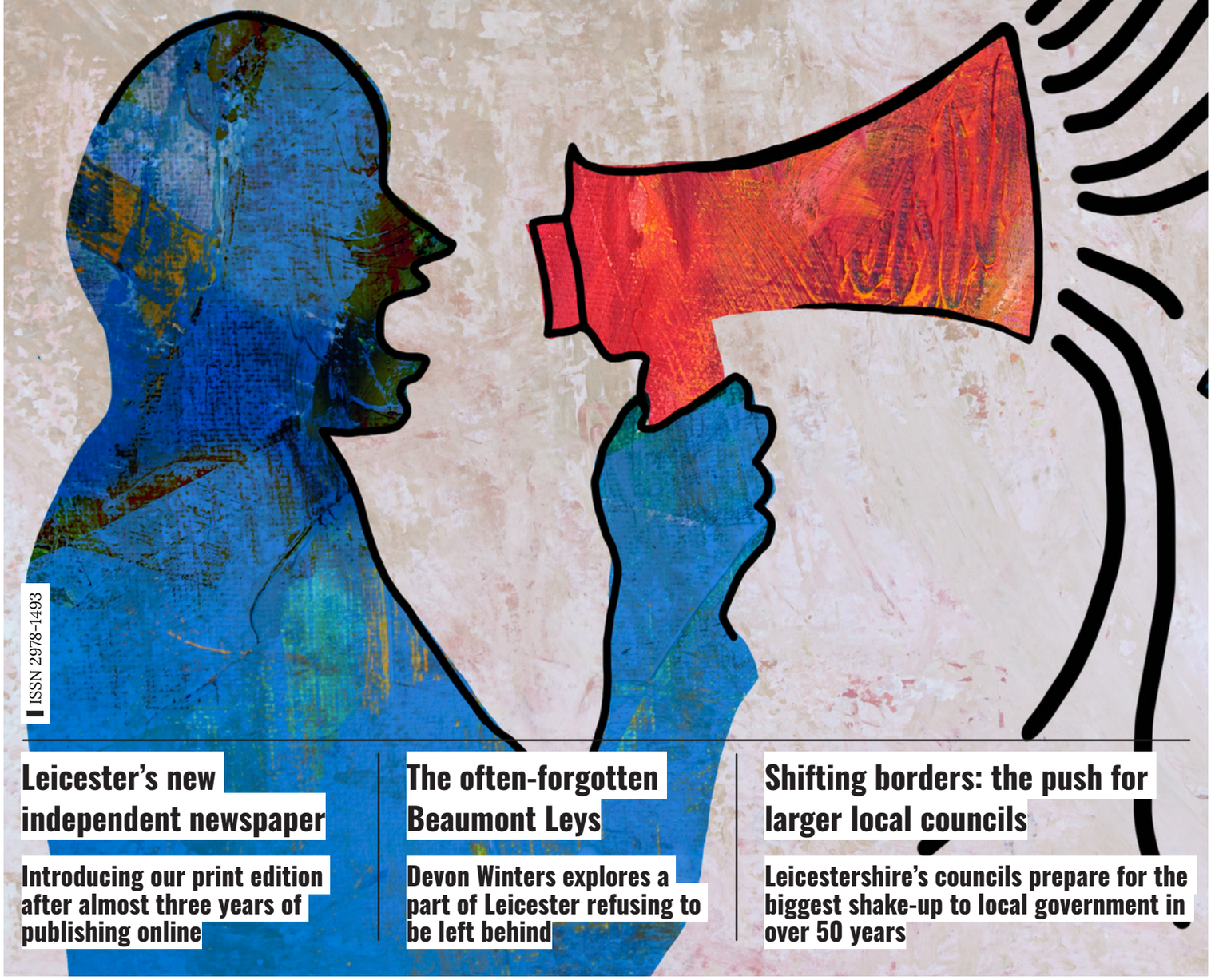
The legacy of Warren Wiesner and Leicester's Aids activists



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Leicester's new independent newspaper

Introducing our print edition after almost three years of publishing online

The often-forgotten Beaumont Leys

Devon Winters explores a part of Leicester refusing to be left behind

Shifting borders: the push for larger local councils

Leicestershire's councils prepare for the biggest shake-up to local government in over 50 years

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"The Leicester Gazette is just the sort of local independent newspaper we need in this country."

DOROTHY BYRNE, FORMER HEAD OF CHANNEL 4 NEWS

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Our cosy office space, located in Leicester's cultural quarter

Welcome to our print edition

After almost three years, the Leicester Gazette is now in print

LEICESTER GAZETTE TEAM

We are a new local, independent newspaper, free to access for all online and now in print. We're thrilled to bring our journalism to a new format.

Many ask us: "isn't print dead?" We believe it still holds value, particularly in local journalism. Print connects with communities that are often ignored. Marginalised and underrepresented groups are poorly served by the legacy press, and we think we can provide a community-owned alternative that meets people's needs.

You see, we're a co-op – a type of business owned by our readers. Anyone can join as a reader member for £2 per month on our website, or volunteer and become a worker member after a year. Members guide our stories and the Gazette's direction, particularly during our AGM held each spring. We also poll members throughout the year.

Creating a print edition is new for us. Our core team is made up of trained journalists, but we have limited experience in print. If you notice any mistakes, please let us know – and *please* be gentle with us!

For our inaugural issue, we've included a mix of old and new. You'll find striking features from our regulars like Margaret Brecknell and Joseph Herbert, as well as reports from the local democracy reporting service. We hope it gives you a taste of what we're all about.

Our first print run is 5,000 copies, with plans to publish quarterly and increase circulation with each issue. While our website is ad-free, we're working with EMSM to fund printing costs through ethical, local advertising – backed by an Ethical Fundraising Policy endorsed by our members.

Credit goes to the team who made this happen. To Emma, our editor, for pouring care and passion into our editorial approach. To Rhys, our community lead, who put this issue together. To Megan and our directors, for guiding the Gazette from its infancy to where it is now. And a heartfelt thanks to all our volunteers and freelancers. We couldn't have done this without you.

Finally, thank you, dear reader, for picking up this issue and supporting the Leicester Gazette. We hope you enjoy reading. ■

Gazette editor and co-founder wins prestigious Georgina Henry Award

The prize will help fund a new media literacy charity focused on young people and hard-to-reach communities

RHYS EVERQUILL

The Leicester Gazette's editor and co-founder Emma Guy has won Women in Journalism's 2025 Georgina Henry Award, named in honour of the former deputy editor of the Guardian and one of the founders of the campaigning group.

Emma will receive £4,000 to fund Subtext, an educational, media literacy, human and social rights charity. The project will deliver interactive workshops to young people and those in hard-to-reach communities. The prize was sponsored by Wiggin LLP.

Judges said: "Misinformation is one of the biggest challenges of our age, with a growing consensus among journalists that something must be done to improve media literacy, especially among young people and those from marginalised and hard-to-reach communities.

"This project does just that by providing practical and much-need solutions to improve understanding among the young and excluded."

Subtext will work closely with the Leicester Gazette to deliver a Midlands programme of media literacy workshops. Both organisations will further collaborate by sharing office space and backend operations. The charity will be governed by an independent board of trustees.

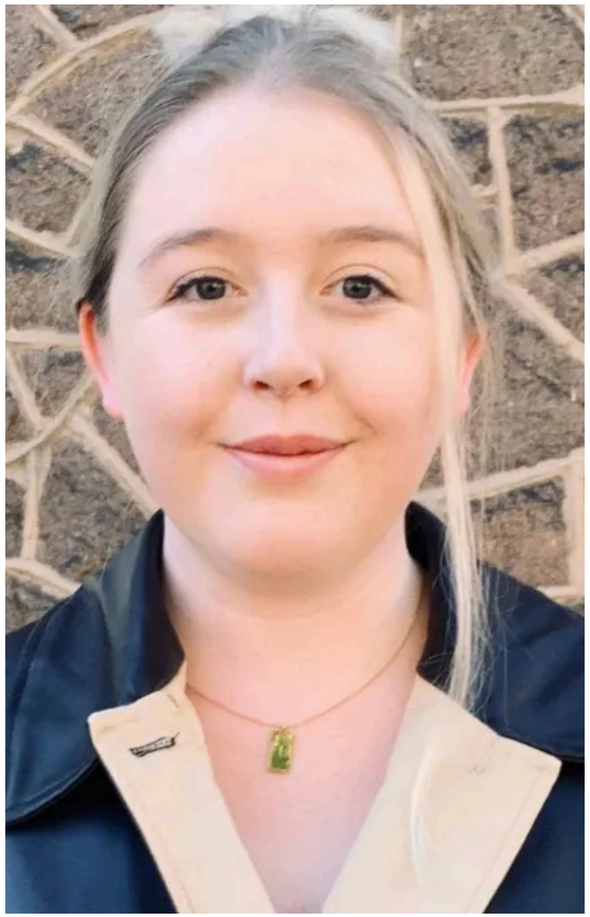
In response to the announcement, Emma said: "I'm overwhelmed, speechless and honoured. Thank you to Women In Journalism and Wiggin for the opportunity. Thank you to our team at Leicester Gazette. And huge congratulations to everyone shortlisted, they are amazing women with outstanding projects.

"Amidst a landscape of misinformation, harmful online content, media bias, news deserts and increasing tensions between communities in the UK, Subtext is a media rights project that cuts through the noise. It will educate, amplify and campaign alongside those most affected by issues in their community, on a national platform."

The prize is used to support an initiative by the applicant. The judges look for evidence of impactful journalism and real innovation either through new ideas or principles. Entries can include work from any journalistic discipline, including those working in video, audio, and written journalism.

Rachel Corp, Chair of Women in Journalism, said: "Women in Journalism has been proud to run the Georgina Henry Award for almost ten years now, supporting a wide range of innovative reporting and projects. Every year we look forward to seeing new ideas and new ways of doing things that push our industry forward. I'd really encourage any woman working in journalism to put an entry in, we'd love to hear from you."

Subtext will be launching in early 2026. ■



Warren Wiesner's Aids campaign legacy

World Aids Day, 1 December, is dedicated to raising awareness of the Aids epidemic

MARGARET BRECKNELL

As Leicester City Council's first Aids coordinator, Warren Wiesner played a key role in providing support for those impacted by HIV and challenging misconceptions regarding its transmission.

Born in July 1955, Wiesner's life as a counsellor began in his mid-twenties when he volunteered for Leicester Gayline. This pioneering telephone helpline was one of the very first of its kind outside London and quickly became an invaluable support network to Leicester's LGBTQ+ community, particularly following the onset of the HIV/Aids epidemic.

Although researchers now believe that HIV was probably originally transmitted to humans from chimpanzees as long ago as the 1920s, the virus only really took a hold in Europe and North America from the early 1980s onwards. Almost immediately, infection levels among the LGBTQ+ community proved disproportionately high in relation to the rest of Western society, with heartbreaking consequences.

As a result of the advances made in medical research over the last four decades, most people diagnosed with HIV in the UK today can thankfully lead a relatively normal healthy life. Back in those early days, however, there was no effective treatment for HIV and this meant that it usually developed the most serious form of the disease, Aids, which nearly always proved fatal. In the climate of fear caused by the HIV/Aids epidemic, the LGBTQ+ community became an easy scapegoat to blame for the rapid spread of the virus, leading to heightened levels of homophobia.

In response to the escalating Aids crisis, an offshoot of Gayline, named Leicester Gay Action, was established to campaign actively for LGBTQ+ rights within the local community. Having already proved a natural-born communicator in their role with Gayline, Wiesner became this new organisation's leading spokesperson, and he was soon called into action to challenge a common misconception.

When a leading immuno-pathologist consultant at Leicester Royal Infirmary was quoted as saying that "it is theoretically possible to contract Aids from saliva", Wiesner penned a furious

Princess Diana with two LASS workers, 1991. Photograph: Records Office

reply to the Leicester Mercury concluding: "The facts are as follows: Worldwide the number of people contacting Aids from saliva is exactly zero".

Wiesner was similarly forthright when addressing an Aids conference held at Leicester Town Hall in August 1986. In a passionate speech, the campaigner criticised the apathy shown towards those with the virus. Out of the 400 people who were invited to the meeting, just 30 attended. "The emotion that we feel is one of anger", Wiesner said. "We are angry that it has taken so long for anyone to do anything about Aids."

That same year, Leicester City Council announced its intention to provide financial support to Gayline and appointed Wiesner as its first dedicated HIV/Aids officer, a role that was later broadened to encompass the whole of Leicestershire. One local Conservative MP, Derek Spencer, reacted furiously, accusing the council of adopting – in his words – a "Go Gay policy". Wiesner penned a typically eloquent response, in which they expressed their outrage at Spencer's remarks and praised the city council's desire to work for greater equality of all Leicester residents.

Wiesner was also one of those involved with the establishment of a major new charitable organisation, the Leicestershire Aids Support Services (LASS), in the late 1980s. LASS aimed to offer practical assistance and counselling for the growing number of people with HIV/Aids in the county, as well as looking to reduce the spread of the virus through the provision of improved HIV testing services and safe-sex education.

From the start, the team at LASS displayed a willingness to embrace new ideas and strategies, even going so far as to arrange a fact-finding visit to San Francisco. Having been at the epicentre of the Aids crisis since the early 1980s, the Californian city had responded by implementing a unique range of highly effective community-led projects. Along with fellow LASS founder member Linda Grant and environmental health officer Sandra Whiles, Wiesner visited various projects in San Francisco including a street outreach programme for sex workers and a targeted HIV support network for the city's minority ethnic groups.

The lessons learned from those experiences enabled the team to introduce similar projects back home in Leicester, including the Black HIV/Aids Forum. A project to distribute condoms to the city's sex workers, accompanied by leaflets offering advice on the dangers posed by HIV, provoked controversy when local police officers refused to become involved in the distribution of the packs. A police spokesperson even went so far as to describe the material as "obscene". The ensuing publicity only served to generate even more interest with requests for the leaflets coming from as far afield as eastern Europe.

LASS received a further welcome boost to its profile when Diana, Princess of Wales, visited its New Walk offices in November 1991 and met local HIV and Aids patients. Diana's groundbreaking role in fighting the stigma attached to those living with Aids at the height of the epidemic has been well-documented. Her two sons continued this campaign following her untimely death just six years later, and Prince Harry paid his own poignant visit to the Leicester charity on its 30th anniversary in 2017.

Tragically, the news emerged in early 1993 that Wiesner had previously been tested as HIV-positive and had now entered the advanced stages of Aids. The influential campaigner died peacefully at home, aged just 38, in late May 1994.

Their partner of a decade, Tony Blundell, published a moving tribute in the Mercury's family notices, along with other personal messages from many more family and friends. The Mercury also published its own obituary, in which LASS colleague and close friend, Linda Grant, described Wiesner as "an out gay man, who was renowned for his intelligence, warmth and charm". Nevertheless, a row subsequently erupted regarding the way in which the newspaper handled the story of Wiesner's passing.

More than 500 people from all walks of life, including local MPs, councillors and celebrities, attended Wiesner's funeral. The coffin was transported in a horse-drawn carriage to Gilroes Cemetery followed by a double-decker bus, full of mourners, and a procession of about 40 cars. The vehicles were decorated with pink balloons and the funeral procession attracted a lot of attention, even bringing the city centre traffic to a halt. Yet, this striking celebration in memory of the life of a notable local public figure did not merit a mention in the Mercury.

Tony Blundell subsequently wrote a letter of complaint to the Mercury regarding its lack of coverage, as well as highlighting the paper's insistence on removing any references to Wiesner as an "out gay man" in tributes in their family notices section. "I believed this column was for us to remember our loved ones. An out, gay man is how I remember Warren", argued Blundell, before concluding that the paper's actions had denied "not just Warren but thousands of other people their dignity and identity".

Friend and colleague, Andy Griffiths, also wrote to the Mercury regarding the paper's policy on the wording in family notices. The editor responded by apologising for any distress it had caused, adding, "We do not consider it an appropriate place for comments of a sexual nature, or regarding a person's sexuality, whether they be heterosexual or homosexual".

Under its new name of East Midlands Sexual Health, the work started by LASS back in the late 1980s continues today, with the organisation leading the campaign for Leicester's new memorial garden to ensure that the local people who have lost their lives to HIV/Aids are never forgotten. This includes Warren Wiesner, who along with those other local campaigners during the early years of the epidemic, made an immeasurable difference. Their swift and robust response to this most alarming of public health crises probably saved many local lives and received praise from far beyond the city's boundaries. ■

What my co-operative journey taught me about work

I was a telephonist for the GPO in the late 70s and 80s; a good job for a young working-class girl from a social housing estate

DOROTHY FRANCIS

People thought you had fallen on your feet if you landed a job at the General Post Office (GPO), a public corporation which became British Telecom. Especially for me as the only black telephonist in a team of 100.

My parents, who worked as labourers, were delighted that I had a white-collar job and I went to work in high heels and pencil skirts, rather than overalls and work boots. They saw it as a return to the leap of faith they took when they left Jamaica to help rebuild the UK economy and provide their children with the education that they had missed out on.

The job at GPO was good, with opportunities to climb the ranks, but as time went by I realised that I needed something else.

What that "something" was I did not quite know. All I knew was that I wanted to change the way I worked.

Dorothy Francis (pictured)

> "All I knew was that I wanted to change the way I worked."

I felt there had to be a way to work that offered ownership, control, a sense of worth, and fair return on labour. I wanted a voice. I wanted to know that I was making a change, that I was leaving a legacy: not just working for the sake of it. Little did I know at the time, these "wants" were at the heart of the co-operative movement. I didn't even know what a co-op was back then! I had shopped in 'The Co-op' all my life but knew nothing about the breadth of co-ops or that I could forge a career in them.

I eventually left the GPO, horrifying my manager, who was aghast that I would leave a "job for life" in exchange for three years of a student grant and an uncertain future. Three years later, on graduating, I was about to embark on a social work MA when a group of friends asked me to join them in setting up a co-op bookshop called Radix.

This was the first time I asked "what is a co-op"? They explained, and it was truly a lightbulb moment. I realised that co-ops crystallised everything I had been seeking for many years. I deferred my university place to join them and within a short time, I knew that I had found my spiritual, moral, ethical, and working home. I never took up my place at university. That was 40 years ago, and I have worked with co-ops ever since.

What is it about co-ops that has fascinated me for so long? I have actively promoted co-ops for 40 years and have advised hundreds of people, helped to set up dozens of co-ops, chaired national co-op bodies and spoken on platforms across Europe and in the Caribbean talking about how co-ops change lives, communities, and societies.

I'm drawn to the fact that co-ops are people-centred enterprises that exist to elevate and support their members to meet common economic, social and cultural needs and aspirations.

Co-ops trade for the benefit of their members and the wider community, be they farmers, housing residents, shoppers, or workers. Co-op principles allow 1.2bn people to have a voice in what concerns them – food, housing, energy, childcare, jobs and more. The one member, one vote principle ensures equality of participation and gives ownership to those involved. Co-ops are based on values of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, and solidarity. These are underpinned by ethical values of honesty, openness, social responsibility and caring for others. A commitment to community, education, and provision of information are also key elements.

These values and principles put fairness and equality at their heart, empowering people to create sustainable enterprises that generate long-term jobs and prosperity. Co-ops allow people to take control of their economic future and – because they are not owned by shareholders – the economic and social benefits stay in the communities where they are generated. Profits are either reinvested in the enterprise or returned to the members.

The turnover for the UK's 7,237 co-ops is £40bn. The Labour party manifesto committed to doubling the UK co-op sector.

Radix: a black co-op bookshop based in Coventry

Radix means 'the root'. We were a black bookshop – selling books for African, African Caribbean, Indian, Chinese, Asian and other people of colour – and wanted to take people back to the roots of their existence as people of colour are often denied our heritage and knowledge of our contribution to the world.

Radix was also a play on 'radical' as political, feminist and black bookshops were all defined as 'radical' at the time. The mere act of selling books that showed gay, black, working-class or political issues was considered off the wall and 'radical,' so we thought we would tap into this and use it as a positive.

This is laudable, but perhaps it aims too low? What if we were to increase the co-op sector ten-fold? Imagine the impact that would have on community ownership, business ethics, democratic control and social ownership. How might this contribute to addressing problems of inequality, reducing ravages wreaked on the planet, solving climate change, reducing radicalism and more?

Co-ops establish and grow better if offered support, guidance, and training. I would like to see policies that promote co-op activity, pass legislation and allow people access to free high-quality advice to help them take control of their work, savings and loans, housing, transport, food and other aspects of life.

Here's to a future of lightbulb moments that lead to societal change! ■

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Students, socialists, and sceptics: Your Party rally in Leicester

Your Party can pull in a crowd in Leicester, but are they a serious political force?

JOSEPH HERBERT

On 11 November, I attended Your Party's first rally in Leicestershire since they first launched in September, taking place at Robert Hall Baptist Church in Westcotes. Here's what went down.

It's fair to say that Your Party has had quite a rocky entrance into British politics, but the party's rally in Leicester has attracted an audience of around 200 people. I've been to a few political rallies in my short career as a local reporter, and this more or less fits my expectations. It doesn't have the slick showmanship of Reform UK's extravagant, flashy, and expensive rallies. Nor is it reminiscent of close-knit communist meetings in dimly lit event spaces. I'm not sure what exactly to make of this event apart from that it is unabashedly socialist with its unpretentious setup.

In the room here today are all flavours of lefties, and people from all corners of Leicester. I take stock of the room and see a range made up of; people and families from all faiths and backgrounds, communists flogging newspapers to fellow event goers, socialists doing the same, old-guard ex-Labour voters looking back towards the 'glory days', and plenty of students from the three nearby universities – a gaggle of them in corduroy and denim jackets with communist pins attached float by me as I stand by the door. They're excitedly chatting about the strikes at the University of Leicester.

As I scan the room and shuffle towards a free seat, I get spotted and flagged down by a steward who recognises me as a reporter, "have you got your camera?" they ask. A few of the speakers have already taken their places near the pulpit. When Your Party co-leader Jeremy Corbyn enters the church the audience erupts into applause. Get the Party Started by P!nk starts playing ("I'm coming up, So you better get this party started"). Chants and cheers fill the venue.

Claudia Webbe takes to the lectern, and the crowd quickly simmers down. Webbe is the ex-independent MP for Leicester East. She's steaming back into Leicester's political scene and was at the launch of the Leicester and Leicestershire branch of Your Party back in September. The panel is made up of local left-wing political heavyweights, including a disability rights activist, and co-chair of the currently striking University of Leicester Universities and Colleges Union (UCU).

Webbe begins with an opening salvo against Your Party's public enemy number one: the billionaires. "We are not here to reform the status quo, we are here to end it," she says. This is met with rapturous applause from the audience. "Our new party will be rooted in class politics, it will be led by those who have stood in the trenches, we are not here to tinker at the edges, we are here to reform."

She briefly rattles through policies which include "nationalising water, energy, and transport," and sets the party goal to "tax the rich." She continues and fiercely exclaims "The establishment will tremble, the billionaires will howl," this is met with resounding cheers and applause from the audience.

One thing is clear from the get-go, this is a party which isn't ashamed to call itself 'socialist.'

You can see why Your Party likes their odds with Leicester; the city is historically a left-wing Labour stronghold, and all three constituencies have been dominated by Labour MPs. But it seems the ground is shifting. At the last general election independent MP Shockat Adam usurped veteran Labour and Co-op MP Jonathan Ashworth in Leicester South. Adam is a member of the Independent Alliance along with Corbyn and Your Party co-leader Zarah Sultana.

In the county it's a bit of a different picture (specifically it's blue with a sprinkling of red). In local politics, Leicestershire County Council is held by Reform, and until May was dominated by the Conservative party. In terms of MPs, the right also does very well. The Tories have won most of the county, and currently hold seven of the 11 seats up for grabs across Leicester and Leicestershire.

Former Leicester East MP Claudia Webbe. Photograph: Devon Winters

The city/county divide isn't quite so clear-cut. On par with national trends, we may be seeing a rightward shift in Leicester. At the city council elections in 2023 the Conservatives rocketed from zero councillors to 17, eating into Labour's majority. At the general election last year, Tory Shivani Raja took Leicester East from Webbe. This was the Conservatives' only gain in the 2024 election anywhere in the UK. Finally, polls from Electoral Calculus predict that Reform will take both Leicester East and West at the next general election, and similar polls suggest Reform may sweep the county from the Tories.

At the time of writing, Your Party hasn't put out any formal manifesto. Instead, they've got a 'political statement' which outlines their broad principles, but this rally is a chance for them to really connect with a potential voter-base. Corbyn knows this, and his speech touches (albeit briefly) on a wide range of topics ranging from foreign policy on Nato to domestic policy on child poverty and migration.

"Without migrant workers, there would be no healthcare service," he says. "There would be no education service, there would be no transport service. We're a party to end the conflict between Ukraine and Russia, and support the people of Palestine."

"Without migrant workers, there would be no healthcare service."

In typical Corbyn fashion, he critiques the government's military spending: "We're developing a new generation of nuclear weapons, nuclear submarines, instead of being a voice for peace around the world." He also critiques the two child benefit cap, saying "The defence budget is going up by £13bn per year over the next three years," he begins. "The cost of ending the two child benefit cap is £1.5bn a year."

There is no shortage of Your Party sceptics in the room tonight. As Corbyn continues his speech, let's address the elephant in the room: Your Party isn't the only choice for those on the left. This rally comes as the Green party, under new leader Zack Polanski, has been making unprecedented gains. YouGov polls put the Greens well ahead of Your Party when it comes to voter intention, and the Greens have been gaining members at an astonishing rate. The Guardian recently suggested that the surge of support for the Greens had been ignited by the very public falling out Corbyn had with Your Party co-leader Zarah Sultana over the membership launch in mid-September, which saw Sultana brand the party a 'sexist boys club'. Since then, Corbyn and Sultana seem to have made up, and it's full steam ahead for Your Party as they launch their rallies across the country.

Two months ago, the new Green party leader Zack Polanski distanced himself from the idea of a pact with Your Party, saying that he would need to see 'very strong arguments' before agreeing to any kind of pact with the fledgling political force.

Since then, the Greens have seen a surge beyond 150,000 members, putting them almost on par with the Labour and Conservative parties, the former of which many say is stumbling rightwards with its rhetoric and its Y2K-esque digital ID scheme. Your Party reportedly has around one-third of the Greens' membership.

The attendees here today are acutely aware that they aren't alone on the political left. I spoke to a fellow event goer before the rally began. I ask them: "What do you think of Your Party?" He immediately hits back with, "I'm voting Green!"

When I ask him to expand, he says "I really like the idea [of Your Party] but they just seem like a mess. People are too much looking at themselves as a gear in the system rather than realising that they have more power than they realise. Your Party is about giving power to the people, but with how the messed up it is and with how Zarah Sultana has messed everything up, I don't think there's a chance."

Another event goer sat nearby chimes in with: "I'm a Green party supporter and I'm here to learn about whether or not Your Party is a serious political opponent. Your Party has already had a lot of issues." When I ask her if she thinks Your Party is a serious threat to the Greens, her answer is a resounding "No."

Based on a show of hands, around half the audience here tonight are registered with Your Party, and a handful more plan to register at a later date. I caught up with one of those who raised their hand after the rally, and they had a different story: "Thought the meeting was inspirational. There was a clear enthusiasm for a party that stands up for ordinary people and is ready to fight for the most oppressed and marginalised in society.

"Because the audience was so mixed with members of different communities, trade unionists, activists and campaigners, there was a fantastic energy and a feeling of unity in the room. It was clear people have had enough and are ready to fight back."

Towards the end of the rally, Corbyn is eventually asked about the Greens, specifically about a potential electoral pact. "It makes no sense if there's three or four independents running on the same policy platform," he says. "There have to be agreements made locally that will be handled by branches at the local level."

That's all he has to say on the matter.

While Your Party's turnout today was larger than they expected, with a rocky national launch, and stronger-than-expected competition from the Greens, they may have a long way to go before they'll be able to win back the public's trust and become electable. ■

The push for larger local councils

The government has promised devolution. But will larger councils drive growth?

ALISTAIR JONES

Central government has come up with a plan for local government (again). Larger local authorities (again). And unitary authorities (again). There is a clear fixation on making local councils bigger, but do the reasons why hold up?

If we go back to the Redcliffe-Maud Report into local government, from 1969, the plan was to introduce unitary local authorities, with a maximum population of around 250,000. Beneath that, Redcliffe-Maud suggested a tier of parish, town or community councils – to maintain a closer level of contact between the people and the elected local authorities, essential for those areas with larger populations or large geographical spread. As it was, a change in government saw the Redcliffe-Maud plans dropped, and tiered local government introduced across England and Wales.

In the early 1990s, the Banham Commission was established to review local government structures. The aim was to get unitary local government introduced across England. The Banham Commission, however, refused to play ball. The structures imposed across Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland are a result of that Commission – a unitary city council, a unitary authority for Rutland, and tiered local government – a county and district or borough councils – for Leicestershire. A similar mix was introduced across England. Issues around the geographical size of some areas led the Banham Commission to recommend the retention of tiered local government. This was to enable the people to remain relatively close to local government.

Since then, central governments of both political persuasions have tried surreptitiously to introduce large unitary authorities across England. This has been done through a range of different means.

In 2016, a consultation was introduced in Dorset, to replace the county council and the district or borough councils with two unitary authorities. The main reason was to save money. The consultation gave a far from ringing endorsement for such a move, but two unitary local authorities were imposed on the people of Dorset.

The financial failure of Northampton County Council saw its abolition in 2021. The district and borough councils were also abolished, and they were replaced with two unitary authorities. The idea of retaining the districts and boroughs was not deemed appropriate because they did not have the means to deliver the countywide services. The suggestion of those councils developing partnerships to do so was not considered viable. Evidently, district or borough councils are incapable of creating and maintaining such partnerships.

Within these developments, central government was fixated on two things: the idea that unitary authorities could save money, and that the population size of these new local authorities should be around 300,000. The current government is following a similar line, although the population size has been ramped up to 500,000.

There is an interesting analogy with the writings of Jonathan Swift and Gulliver's Travels. In Gulliver's second voyage, he ended up on the island of Brobdingnag, which was populated by giants. The giants looked at Gulliver and decided that, although he looked human to them, he was too small and was therefore deemed not to be human. This is the fixation of our central government – councils below the population threshold are deemed to be too small to be effective and efficient local government.

At this point, let me be very clear: this is a political decision by central government. They will impose whatever they want on local government, regardless of the opinions of experts, councillors, local officials, or the public. And, constitutionally, they can push such legislation through parliament to do so.

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Academically, from research conducted around the world, the support for the economic arguments is split. There is an acknowledgement that savings can be made in the longer term, through employing fewer staff (after the cost of making a proportion of staff redundant has been factored in).

The counter to this is that the remaining staff may not be experts in those areas – hypothetically, imagine a council officer who had previously worked in Rutland, having to deal with issues in North West Leicestershire. There may be subject expertise, but the local knowledge will be lacking. That leads to longer time in dealing with issues and, ultimately, greater expense. We are already seeing such problems with the relatively new Somerset unitary authority, which is raising concerns that they cannot deliver all of their expected services under the current financial constraints. If councils declare bankruptcy, watch the push to make the council even larger, rather than addressing the issue of finance.

Where there is academic agreement about large councils is in relation to democracy. The effects on local democracy could be disastrous – less engagement at the polling station; fewer councillors dealing with an even larger caseload from their residents. This, in turn, leads to further disillusionment with the council and councillors because problems are not being addressed. This point is never factored into a review of council size – it's all about the economics.

So, what are the plans for Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland?

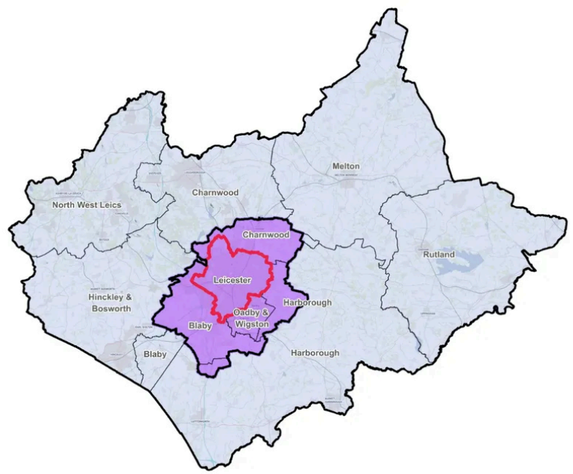
Well, there's three... a single unitary including Rutland (city unchanged); three unitaries (North, City, South); and a single county unitary including Rutland (City boundary expanded).

In all three scenarios, we will see ludicrously engineered structures, forcing together district and borough councils to fit an arbitrary population target.

All of this is in response to a centrally driven agenda, which is not informed by local needs or local practice on the ground. It is exacerbated by a hugely constricting financial set-up, where local authorities are dependent on revenue from the centre and are restricted in the ways in which they can generate new revenue streams. The creation of larger units of local government may delay the onset of councils, in effect, declaring themselves bankrupt.

Rather than considering the role, function, and financing of local government, the push is to create larger units of local government as a means by which the financial problems of the sector may be resolved. On top of that, it could do harm to local government, as that 'local' identity is lost. Once that identity is lost, the question then moves on to whether we 'need' local government. The new combined authorities – a tier of regional government – are taking on the roles of local government already. They could end up replacing local government, and that local identity could be harmed further. ■

Alistair is an associate professor in politics at De Montfort University. His expertise is in local government. Analysis adapted from original, published 3 April 2025.



Frantic Assembly's Lost Atoms review – memories both beautiful and painful

Frantic Assembly's 30th anniversary production arrived in Leicester in the first stop of its England tour

LEAH EVERQUILL

Thirty years ago, a small group of students at Swansea University formed a theatre company called Frantic Assembly. Thirty years later, they've forged a reputation as one of the UK's leading theatre troupes. Known for their use of movement and music, Frantic Assembly have created a tried and tested signature style seen in their notable productions like The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time and Othello. Now, they're taking their 30th anniversary production, Lost Atoms, on a tour around England. Their first stop was Curve Theatre in Leicester.

Lost Atoms is about a couple, Jess and Robbie, who are looking back on the highs and lows of their romantic relationship. They exist both in the memories they're revisiting, and in another liminal space that could be limbo, the afterlife, or another plane of existence from which they view their shared recollections. They each have different perspectives of how certain events in their life unfolded, and it speaks to the idea that we often embellish, misremember, or even misinterpret instances in our past. The text, written by Anna Jordan, is rich and entirely character-driven. Jordan also recently wrote some episodes of the Netflix television adaptation of the David Nicholls novel One Day.

Indeed, there's a taste of One Day in this play. There's also flavours of Normal People by Sally Rooney, and the 2004 Michel Gondry film Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind. It's about the coming together, and falling apart, of two people who couldn't be more different and mismatched, and yet somehow find love and solace in each other. There's a palpable sense of impending sadness and doom throughout. Act one is a light and lusty exploration of the beginnings of Jess and Robbie's relationship. Some of the humour, despite offering much-needed levity, is somewhat squirm-inducing because of the heavy focus on sex and swearing – but that's simply a matter of taste. Act two, by contrast, is both explosive and quietly devastating as it approaches the inevitable collapse of Jess and Robbie's relationship.

The production has only two actors – Hannah Sinclair Robinson as Jess and Joe Layton as Robbie – who both give strong performances, both emotionally and physically. Jess is a free-spirited, non-committal, stimulation-seeking postgraduate student, artist, and party animal, whereas Robbie is an

Photograph: Tristram Kenton

awkward, bumbling, traditional homebody who teaches young people in the care system how to cook. Both actors are impressive in their range and show a sharp contrast between their young, infatuated characters from the first act, and their hostile, bitter characters in the second act. They barely have any time offstage and the show entirely rests on their ability to make the characters, and their relationship, interesting and gripping. The chemistry between the actors is palpable, but these two particular characters falling in love isn't entirely convincing. As an audience member, it's a struggle to remain invested in their relationship.

The play is strongest in its staging. The direction by Scott Graham is robust and seamless. Each scene flows smoothly into another, and the fascinating and sometimes demanding movement performed by the two actors offers unspoken thoughts and feelings that are a blend of wholesome, sexy, painful, curious, and excitable. There's some remarkable stage design by Andrzej Goulding: a huge filing cabinet at the back of the stage that acts as functional drawers (for both possessions and memories), steps, windows, a toilet, a table and chairs at a cafe, and the edge of a cliff. The idea of a literal mind palace in the form of a filing cabinet is a genius creative move. A platform also folds out from the cabinet and becomes a bed and a place of many important, crucial conversations between the two leads. Two chairs are also used as central set pieces and become seats in a hospital waiting room, a bath, and a car. The visual concept is a treat to watch, and the play would have felt lacking without it. Frantic Assembly have ensured that every inch of the performance space is used functionally and with purpose.

The quick switches between past memories and present limbo are marked beautifully by Simisola Majekodunmi's lighting design. Simple strip lights are used as part of the set and change colour to denote the past (warm orange), or the present (cool blue-white). Alongside this, the sound design by Carolyn Downing and music supervision by Julie Blake are both understated and effective, guiding the audience gently from one environment to another. The combination of these technical aspects of Lost Atoms helps to portray memories as things that can be either painfully sharp, or somewhat blurry and fractured.

The first act of Lost Atoms is quite slow, but it successfully establishes the non-linear narrative and helps the audience to become comfortable with Jess and Rob's present, limbo-state interjections. The romance is certainly a story we've seen elements of before, unfortunately relying on well-worn tropes at times. But the way that the play has been uniquely realised on stage sets it apart from those previous, similar narratives. However, the second act flies by. In a puzzling turn of events, Jess and Rob no longer comment on their past memories from the future and instead the audience play witness to the unravelling of their shared life together. The end of the play is abrupt, does not quite stick the landing, and feels somewhat weak compared to the rest of the story.

It's a relief that the show does not try to over explain itself or the concept. For example, we never find out why the characters are revisiting their memories, or where exactly they are supposed to be in this strange, otherworldly realm. But, the show does leave a lot of questions unanswered and certainly creates significant room for interpretation by the audience. In a way, the open-endedness of Lost Atoms is what makes it such a realistic, refreshing, and contemporary approach to a romantic story. Sometimes, relationships just fizzle out and nobody is solely to blame. Oftentimes, we don't get the closure we want or need. We just have to accept it and move forward.

Lost Atoms, commissioned and produced by Frantic Assembly, is made in collaboration with Curve Theatre, Mayflower Southampton, and Lyric Hammersmith Theatre. The tour continues until 28 February 2026 where the show closes at Lyric Hammersmith Theatre. You can find tour dates, locations, and ticket information on Frantic Assembly's website. ■

The often-forgotten Beaumont Leys

This photographer takes to the streets of Beaumont Leys

DEVON WINTERS

Beaumont Leys, north of the city, is a product of efforts to expand Leicester in the 1970s. Before then, it was mainly farmland and a sewage system. The suburb has had its share of difficulties and bad press. Decades of deprivation have given it a bad name, and the council shuttered its market in 2023. Now, as Leicester looks to expand once more, Beaumont Leys struggles on – refusing to be left behind. ■

The main Walkers Crisps factory is in Beaumont Leys

St Luke's Parish Church

Two women wait for the bus

Derry Walk

View of Leicester from Kinley Road

Creative signage

England flag graffiti

Stylie's Jerk Station, Caribbean street food

At Leicester's Comic-Con, community and cosplay intersect

Meet the relatively small convention with a mighty sense of community

JOSEPH HERBERT AND EREN JAMES

If there's one thing to be said about Comic-Con in Leicester, it's that it's small, very small. The 400-ish strong crowd filled The Venue at De Montfort University with ease, and compared to its glitzy and glamorous counterparts in London and Edinburgh, which pull in hundreds of thousands of attendees, Leicester Comic-Con is minuscule. But for what it lacks in crowd size, it certainly makes up for it with its spirit.

The Leicester Comic-Con is run by Striking Events, who organise pop culture events across the country; Leicester is merely a single stop on their tour.

We showed up to Leicester Comic-Con, fittingly, dressed as 1950s journalists, to have a chat with attendees about the event's importance. The event takes place every year and has attracted a dedicated bunch of regulars.

Jill is a self-described 'collector of stuff,' and she's been coming to what she calls "pop culture-style events" since 2010 and is now the creative and marketing lead at Striking Events.

Gazette reporter Eren James. Photograph: Joseph Herbert

"Leicester's become our sort of key show," Jill begins, "we've been back here about eight or nine times now. It's always popular, it's always a really good crowd. It's the right kind of people, you know?"

Striking Events has found its niche in holding smaller, close-knit conventions; there's a definite sense of community here. "There seems to be the community of the dealers, there's the Daleks, we've got the Deadpool," says Jill, "You'll definitely find a lot of these people go from show to show, there is a whole community out there.

"You've got the big shows, which everybody knows about – they get well publicised, and we try to bring that into a more localised set, that's our thing."

So it's no secret that the Leicester Comic-Con is relatively small, but for those who attend, it's equally, if not more, important than the big conventions down in London and across the country. We spoke to the person dressed as Deadpool, who echoed Jill's sentiments about Leicester Comic-Con being community-first.

"I've been to some of the bigger ones," he tells us, "but we do Striking Events because they're a good local one, it's small, and it's inclusive for everyone.

"I prefer this because I think people are a lot more chilled out. I find that at the bigger ones, people are just there to buy stuff, whereas everyone here is just here to have fun."

Katie, from K Bass Illustration, also addressed the consumerist nature of larger conventions. "The smaller ones tend to be a bit more intimate, so you can have more one-to-one conversations," says Katie, "whereas at the big ones people are literally just grabbing and going, like it's a meal deal."

The artist has collaborated with the likes of Lucasfilm and Marvel, and has an impressive array of art for sale.

There was plenty on offer elsewhere too, but equally, community groups and people collecting for charity had a very strong showing.

The East Midlands Ghostbusters, for example, collect for Leicester-based charity Heart Link, a charity which supports 'parents and families who have a child with a heart condition.'

Ben, dressed fully in Ghostbusting uniform, has been all over the east Midlands with the Ghostbusters. "We go to all the events, we do school fête visits, and whatever it is that we do, we're always raising money for Heart Link in Leicester."

For the East Midlands Ghostbusters, it's a personal mission. "The reason we have them as our chosen charity," says Ben, "is because one of our founders' daughters was born with two holes in her heart. She's still with us, and these guys were looking after her, and they were amazing, the care they gave was incredible."

The East Midlands Ghostbusters team. Photograph: Joseph Herbert

He continues, "One of the nice things is that sometimes at the Leicester events, I've had people come up and be like 'I was treated by them, and look at me, I'm an adult.'

"So it's just really nice knowing that they're doing nice work, plus it gives me a wonderful excuse to dress up like a childhood hero and wander around in public on a regular basis."

With unmatched passion, Ben walked us through his ghost trap, which was equipped with an eerily convincing smoke effect, which we later learned was generated from a repurposed vape pen. As he showed us, Ben greeted fellow passing convention stallholders.

James from Droidbuilders UK. Photograph: Joseph Herbert

"It sounds very cliché to say, but there's a sense of family at these things," he tells us. "We do the same circuit over the years, and because we go to all of the cons all over the east Midlands, you'll see several of the same faces and the same people.

"You build up friends that way, everybody's here to look after each other, which is really nice as well. You don't really get any of the cutthroat nature at this kind of event; it's more people just being kind and nice to each other."

The intersection between nerd culture and collecting for charity continues with DroidBuilders UK. "We're a nonprofit organisation," says droid builder James, "we don't make any money at all, we're always at a loss, but we don't care."

The global community of droid builders are dedicated to making authentic remote-controlled Star Wars droids, and like East Midlands Ghostbusters, they also collect for charity. "We change the charity each year," explains James. "I'm not getting paid, it's just a hobby for me."

Leicester Comic-Con is also a 'stepping stone' for people dipping their toes into the world of pop culture conventions, and offers a safe space for those with additional needs. The event offers early entry for attendees who'd prefer a quieter atmosphere.

We spoke to attendee Charlie, who told us they'd been to MCM Comic-Con in London, which draws in hundreds of thousands of attendees.

"The smaller ones are better for beginners. I usually go to the smaller ones." Charlie told us, "I was really scared to go to my first one because it was the first megacon. I walked my way to MCM, and it hit me. It's a very different environment, [at] the bigger ones you get more cosplayers, you get more sounds and more of everything."

In all honesty, Leicester Comic-Con felt less like a comic book convention and more like a modern take on the classic village fête. The atmosphere was much the same, and the event had all the hallmarks of it: familiar faces, quirky characters, and, most importantly, plenty of collection boxes for various charitable causes.

However, there sadly weren't any Victoria sponge cakes. ■

Violence too high at city prison, watchdog says

A new report has found the level of violence and drug use at HMP Leicester is too high

TESS RUSHIN, LOCAL DEMOCRACY REPORTER

Inspectors launched a surprise visit to HMP Leicester in August. During the visit, they found that the use of force at the prison was too high, and the prison had "the highest assault rate among comparable reception prisons".

At the time of the inspection, the Victorian-era prison held 328 adult men, whose ages ranged from 21 to 68.

In a subsequent report published on 17 November, inspectors also noted that the positive mandatory drug testing rate was 29 per cent and there were "persistent delays in providing substance misuse support". It added that drug strategy meetings "lacked effective leadership or meaningful follow-up action".

Photograph: Devon Winters

The watchdog said violence was the highest of any comparable reception prison. In the previous 12 months, the report said there had been 114 assaults on staff and 143 on prisoners, "both of which had risen since the last inspection". It added "the assault rate was 821 per 1,000 prisoners, against a comparator average of 479".

In its response, the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) said staff at the prison "are receiving extra training and working to reduce violence in the prison".

Inspectors identified 14 key concerns, of which five were priorities. Alongside the high levels of violence and drug use, priority concerns also included health partnerships failing to address "several long-standing issues", the daily regime being unreliable, "with staff not always being able to account for prisoners' whereabouts", and not enough expectations for prisoners to engage in education, skills and work.

Four areas were looked at: safety, respect, purposeful activity, and preparation for release. The inspection found the prison to be "sufficiently good for safety, reasonably good for respect, poor for purposeful activity and reasonably good for preparation for release".

High turnover of prisoners had shaped their findings, and the prison's ageing infrastructure "was an obvious challenge", noting that "many cells on the main wing had damaged flooring and windows and poor ventilation, and needed to be refurbished".

Healthcare was another area that raised concerns, with high staff turnover rates, high rates of missed appointments and poor supervision of medicines administration. Mental health services were "stretched, and patients often waited too long for transfer to specialist secure community beds". Support for prisoners with additional learning needs was "insufficient, and too many prisoners ultimately released homeless".

The inspectors noted that conditions were overcrowded for the prisoners who experienced poor daily routines, "with limited time out of cell, an unreliable regime, delays in roll checks and inconsistent unlock times". It added "time out of cell on the weekends was even worse".

Too many prisoners "did not gain the relevant skills for employment after release or develop a work ethic". It added "the curriculum lacked ambition, attendance at education, skills and work was too low and punctuality was poor".

HMP Leicester was well led and had committed staff "but challenges with the cramped and ageing infrastructure, a lack of work opportunities and the transience of the population, both hampered progress and defined the experience of those held".

Staff-prisoner relationships were good, and staff retention had improved. Prisoners had good access to social visits and access to a refurbished gym, which was open seven days a week.

An MoJ spokesperson, which oversees the Prison Service, said: "This government inherited a prison system in crisis – overcrowded, with violence and access to drugs at unacceptable levels.

"We are building 14,000 prison places and reforming sentencing, so our jails create better citizens, not better criminals. Staff at HMP Leicester are receiving extra training and working to reduce violence in the prison." ■

County council spending review could cost £30m

It was initially thought the contract was worth up to £1.4m

HANNAH RICHARDSON, LOCAL DEMOCRACY REPORTER

New documents reveal Leicestershire County Council's contract with consulting firm Newton is actually worth "up to £30 million", with the previously reported figure of £1.4m audit just phase one of that contract.

The county council currently needs to plug an expected £90m gap in its day-to-day spending by 2029 in order to balance its books – something it is legally bound to do. It also has an £80m shortfall in money set aside for projects and an £118m deficit in its special needs budget.

Once areas have been identified where costs can be cut, the council will need to choose whether to implement those – and if they will need Newton's help to do so. Savings initiatives which require support from the firm will be "costed individually" and decisions will be made on a "project-by-project basis".

The authority said it would be "likely" that those projects would "involve a mixed approach" with "some being within the council's existing capacity and expertise, some requiring full external support from Newton, and some with a balance between the two". Any additional fees would be "fixed" and "only payable on completion of agreed milestones and evidenced savings delivery". Newton "guarantees" the ongoing savings benefits would be "greater than their one-off fee", they added.

Conservative leader of the opposition Deborah Taylor said the price tag that comes with the review was "astonishing", criticising it as "another expensive bill" that was being "handed to residents".

A county council spokesperson said: "The review is costing £1.4m and no further work has been agreed. If we decide to work with Newton on future savings initiatives, costs would depend on what the project is and payment of fees would be dependent upon delivery of savings." ■

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Greens celebrate record-breaking ‘Coats for All’ events in Sileby and Syston

It follows the Green party gaining their first seat on the county council in May

RHYS EVERQUILL

The Charnwood Green party’s Coats for All project has achieved new milestones this year, bringing together communities in a remarkable effort to keep residents warm and dry during the winter. This year’s events marked the largest turnout since the project began.

In its fourth year in Sileby, the event saw an increase in both coat donations and local people collecting coats. It also marked the first Coats for All event in Syston.

Speaking to the Leicester Gazette, Leicestershire county councillor Naomi Bottomley said: “It’s truly amazing to see just how generous our communities are. Together, we’ve made sure that people across Sileby, Seagrave, the Wolds villages and Syston can stay warm and dry this winter.

“This is what real community spirit looks like – people coming together to look after one another. In times like these, it’s important to remember that this kind of community action is what patriotism really means. It’s about caring for our neighbours and strengthening the places we call home.”

Charnwood borough councillor Laurie Needham said: “What’s brilliant about Coats for All is that it not only supports people financially, but it also helps us make better use of what we already have in our communities. By recycling and reusing coats that might otherwise go to waste, we’re reducing our environmental impact while making a real difference for local families. It’s a perfect example of sustainability and community working hand in hand.”

The Green party has had a strong showing in Charnwood in recent years. At the 2023 local elections, the party gained seven seats, bringing their total to eight. They won their first seat on the Leicestershire County Council in May this year.

Activist Bekky Yates, who played a key role in launching the event in Syston, said: “I’m so pleased we were able to bring Coats for All to Syston this year. The response has been incredible – so many people came together to donate, share and support each other. It shows just how powerful community can be when we all pull together.

County councillor Naomi Bottomley and borough councillor Geoff Lawrence

“Due to the generosity of our communities, we were also in the position to support Women’s Aid, local homeless charities and a number of local charity shops, ensuring that all donations continue to support people within our community.”

The Coats for All project collects and redistributes warm clothing to the community, helping keep people warm and dry while reducing waste.

Organisers say plans are already underway to return next year – and to make the event even bigger and better. ■

There were hundreds of donations

Leicestershire councillor fears ‘fake’ account was set up to discredit her

The councillor believes ‘political opponents’ are behind it

HANNAH RICHARDSON, LOCAL DEMOCRACY REPORTER

Leicestershire county councillor Deborah Taylor fears opponents are “attempting to discredit” her after a fake social media account surfaced. Taylor branded the move a “dirty trick” and has referred the matter to Leicestershire Police.

A Facebook profile bearing Taylor’s face and name appeared on Facebook on 31 October. The Conservative councillor said it was not something she had created, labelling it a “fake account” in a message on X.

One post was published before the account disappeared from Facebook a short time later, suggesting it had been deleted or locked. The post stated that the author, seemingly posing as Taylor, would be “putting in a vote of no confidence” against a number of Reform and Labour members at “the next council meeting”.

The post added: “It’s time I was made leader of the county council.”

The profile also listed “leader of the council” in the job section. Taylor told the local democracy reporting service she believes it is “highly likely” that the account was set up by a “political opponent”.

She added: “This is a clear example of attempting to discredit myself and the Conservative group in Leicestershire. Dirty tricks will never succeed.”

A Leicestershire Police spokesperson said: “We can confirm we have received an allegation relating to postings made on a social media account. An appointment has been made to speak to the complainant to obtain further details.”

A Leicestershire County Council spokesperson said the council considered this to be a party political matter and therefore not something on which it would comment. ■

Conservative leader of the oppositon Deborah Taylor. Photograph: Deborah Taylor

Reform UK cuts ‘unviable’ school meals service

The loss-making service provides 20,000 meals a day

TESS RUSHIN, LOCAL DEMOCRACY REPORTER

The loss-making school meal service run by Leicestershire County Council will be axed after officials said it was “unviable” in the long term.

The service, which is delivered by Leicestershire Traded Services (LTS), provides 20,000 meals a day to 119 schools across Leicestershire. LTS ended 2024/25 with a loss of £329,000 – a figure which the county council said was a “significantly improved position” on the £1.9m lost the previous year.

Despite improvements, the council’s cabinet took the decision to close the service at a meeting behind closed doors in July. The decision was revealed in mid-November following a report of the council’s scrutiny commission.

The service will come to an end at the end of the current academic year. Photograph: Sam Edwards (stock)

Presenting the report on 10 November, Richard Hunt, the county council’s head of catering, hospitality and country parks, said that LTS had acquired several contracts in Leicester after the closure of its city catering service. However, he said the service, which will finish at the end of the current academic year, had also lost a number of contracts as multi-academy trusts retendered their catering provision.

He revealed that this year the service was forecast to make £41,000, but continued financial pressure from elsewhere meant LTS could not continue in the long-term, while the industry itself was “rapidly” changing.

Hunt pointed towards challenges relating to staff cost inflation of 5.8 per cent – a figure driven by national living wage rises – and food inflation of 3.4 per cent in the year to April 2025. In addition, he said Universal Infant Free School Meals (UIFSM) funding from government had failed to keep pace with inflation.

Hunt said: “Following feedback from the scrutiny commission at their meeting in March 2025, the cabinet considered a report on the future of the school food service and agreed to close the service from the end of the current academic year.

“And this was in recognition that despite our improved financial position, the world of school food is changing rapidly with retendering of services by academy trusts and the desire from schools for an overall cheaper service which LTS cannot provide. All schools and staff were notified in September and we are supporting those schools who have requested it to assist them in finding a new caterer for the start of the academic year”.

The Reform-run county council said it was working with schools to ensure a “smooth transition” for those impacted by LTS’ axing. A spokesperson said: “The school food industry has changed rapidly and has been loss making for Leicestershire County Council for several years. Despite a recent positive upturn in performance, the long-term outlook shows the service is unviable.

“A mixture of schools and academy trusts retendering their school catering, and their desire for cheaper services has created an environment in which we expect that we cannot compete with without making further losses.

“We are leading procurement for a large number of the affected schools to make sure there is a smooth transition to a new supplier next summer.

“The other schools – including most academies – have chosen to procure their own catering providers. It is expected that the vast majority of staff will transfer any new catering provider under TUPE protections.”

News of LTS’ axing comes as the Department for Education said meal rates for the academic year 25/26, including UIFSM, have been increased to £2.61 per meal, which comes to £495 annually per child. ■

City council announces U-turn on library cuts

Major cuts to Leicester’s libraries and community centres have been scrapped

TESS RUSHIN, LOCAL DEMOCRACY REPORTER

The city council has now “significantly changed” its proposals to make £2.1m in savings by scrapping Leicester’s libraries and community centres, following consultation with Leicester residents.

New proposals see £1.57m savings per year instead. There will still be staff cuts at city libraries and community centres, albeit smaller than the previous proposal.

Under new measures, library and community services would be operated from 12 multiservice centres, in areas like Beaumont Leys and Highfields – as well as from Leicester Central Library. They will be open between 30 and 40 hours a week.

Five community centres are to be offered for the community to run – down on the previously proposed 11. These include Braunstone Frith Recreation Centre, Coleman Neighbourhood Centre, Eyres Monsell Community Centre, Gilmorton Community Rooms and the Tudor Centre.

Belgrave Neighbourhood Centre and Rushey Mead Recreation Centre would continue to be run by the council, it added. All multiservice centres and the Central Library open on Saturdays and until 6pm on at least one evening a week.

St Matthews Library would relocate to St Matthews Children’s, Young People and Family Centre, and in Netherhall, either the Armadale Centre or Netherhall Neighbourhood centre could become a community-run facility.

Customer self-access would be implemented at a further six libraries (New Parks, the BRITE Centre library, Belgrave, Hamilton, Pork Pie and St Barnabas), in addition to some staffed hours.

Fosse Neighbourhood Centre and Library would close. The council said it would work with Alice Hawkins Community Projects, which operates from the annexe of the building, to support them to relocate nearby.

The council will also invest in key buildings to enable them to operate as hubs, bringing together a range of services provided by the council and partners.

In response to the new proposals, Councillor Hemant Rae Bhatia, Conservative leader of the opposition, said: “Labour councillors are trying to take credit for services they just defunded. People aren’t stupid. Centres in Labour majority wards are being dumped while they preside over decisions to waste millions elsewhere”.

Councillor Vi Dempster, assistant city mayor for libraries and community centres, said: “We embarked on this huge consultation programme because we know how important these services are to people, and we really wanted to hear people’s thoughts before any decisions were made.

“As the council has always said, this was never a closure programme, it was about finding ways to protect these services in the face of ongoing budget cuts, and to ensure they continue to be available across the whole city...”

She continued: “The council would support community groups to develop business plans as part of the Community Asset Transfer process, if this goes ahead... We are also determined to continue to involve communities to help us to ensure that all of these services are well-used and more income is generated as a result.”

The council said more than 6,000 people took part in the online consultation, and over 1,000 more attended the 12 community meetings and 15 drop-in meetings the council held across the city. The council said a formal executive decision on the revised proposals is due to be made in early December. ■

Banana bread with cranberries and chocolate chips

GIANGI TOWNSEND

What's there not to like about banana bread? Perfect for breakfast, an afternoon snack, or evening dessert. Either way, it's always welcome in everyone's homes. Here is my version of the banana bread with cranberries and white chocolate chips. Added a bit of fun to my classic recipe. Love with each bite.

This recipe makes two loaves. It's a great gift during the holidays. Use smaller molds and watch closely for the baking time. A great present always well received. Because the white chocolate melts in the baking process, this banana bread will take a little bit longer to bake than your usual one. As with each oven, the baking process may be different, I strongly suggest that you bake it for 45 minutes and then do the toothpick test in the middle of the bread to make sure it is baked all the way through. Trust me here. The sides may be a bit darker but nothing worse than a loaf of non-baked banana bread.

Ingredients

2 cups granulated sugar

1 cup softened unsalted butter

6 ripe bananas (around 3 cups)

4 eggs well beaten

2 ½ cups unbleached flour

2 teaspoons baking soda

1 teaspoon salt

1 tablespoon vanilla

1 cup dried cranberries

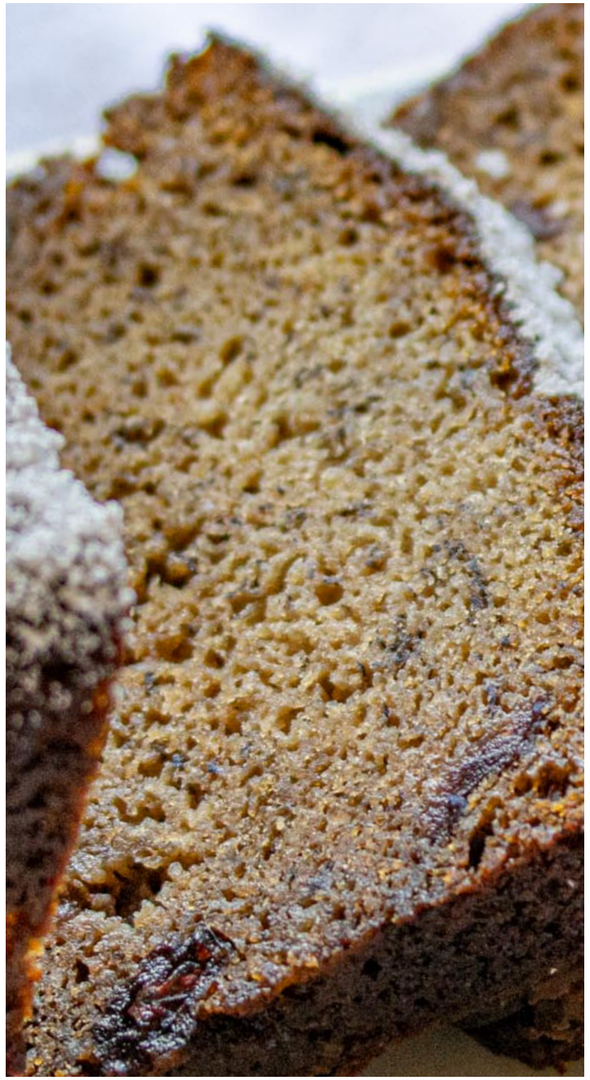
½ cup white chocolate chips

Servings: 8

Preparation

1. Preheat oven to 180C.

2. With an electric beater, cream together sugar and butter until light and fluffy. Add bananas and eggs, beating until well-mixed.



Banana bread is a perfect treat for the holidays. Photograph: Giangi Townsend

3. Sift together dry ingredients three times. Blend with the bananas mixture but do not over mix. Fold in the vanilla, cranberries, and chocolate chips.

4. Pour into two lightly-greased loaf pans. Bake for 45 minutes to one hour, until firm in the center and the edges begin to separate from pans. Do not over bake.

5. Cool on a rack for 10 minutes before removing from pans. These freeze beautifully. ■

Recipe sourced from Foodista, under a Creative Commons license.

Send your recipes to info@leicester.news for a chance to be featured in the next issue of the newspaper.

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ethicalshop.org

Events calendar

Here's what's coming up over the next three months

LEICESTER GAZETTE TEAM

Christmas Market
When? Now until 28/12/25
What time? 09:00 - 17:00
Where? City Centre, Leic

The Sound of Music
When? Now until 17/01/26
What time? Varies
Where? Curve, Leic

Santa Express
When? Now until 24/01/26
What time? 10:00
Where? GCR, Leic

Millennium Collections
When? Now until 21/02/26
What time? 10:00 - 16:00
Where? Melton Museum

Winter Fair
When? 07/12/26
What time? 11:00 - 17:00
Where? Clarendon Park, Leic

The Big Christmas Show
When? 10/12/2025
What time? 19:00
Where? Intl. Arts Centre, Leic

Green Place Open Day
When? 13/12/25
What time? 11:00 - 16:00
Where? Green Place, Sileby

Christmas Cabaret
When? 18/12/25
What time? 19:00
Where? The Waterfront, MH

Candlelight: Thundercat
When? 27/12/25
What time? 18:00
Where? Guildhall, Leic

NYE Comedy Special
When? 31/12/25
What time? 10:00 - 12:00
Where? Peter's Pizzeria, Leic

Beauty and the Beast
When? 09/01/26
What time? 19:30
Where? Iveshead School, L'boro

Brian Cox Live
When? 28/01/26
What time? 19:30
Where? De Montfort Hall, Leic

Queens of Bollywood
When? 01/02/26
What time? 18:00
Where? The Y Theatre, Leic

Punk Off
When? 03/02/2026
What time? 19:30
Where? De Montfort Hall, Leic

Leicester Comedy Festival
When? 04/02 - 22/02/26
What time? Varies
Where? Varies

Crime Scene Improvisation
When? 07/02/26
What time? 17:00
Where? The Y Theatre, Leic

The Nutcracker
When? 07/02/2026
What time? 12:00 & 17:30
Where? De Montfort Hall, Leic

Pun Championship
When? 09/02/2026
What time? 19:30
Where? De Montfort Hall, Leic

Kinky Boots
When? 03/03 - 07/03/26
What time? 19:30 - 21:50
Where? Curve, Leic

Intro to Indian Dance
When? 07/03/26
What time? 10:30
Where? Att. Arts Centre, Leic

Pink Floyd Experience
When? 12/03/26
What time? 19:30 - 21:30
Where? L'boro Town hall

Spring Wreath Making
When? 18/03/26
What time? 10:00
Where? Att. Arts Centre, Leic

Jamie Hutchinson
When? 25/03/26
What time? 19:30
Where? The Y Theatre, Leic

Fairport Convention
When? 29/03/26
What time? 19:30 - 21:30
Where? L'boro Town hall

Send your events to info@leicester.news for a chance to be featured in the next issue of the newspaper.

WHAT'S ON
De Montfort Hall
0116 233 3111 demontforthall.co.uk

LEICESTER COMEDY FESTIVAL GALA PREVIEW SHOW
Friday 9 January 2026

MURDER TRIAL NIGHT
Thursday 12 February 2026

AN AUDIENCE WITH MARTIN O'NEILL
Thursday 26 February 2026

MADAMA BUTTERFLY
Tuesday 17 March 2026

SALE LANES FINE JEWELLERY SALE

RELOCATION STOCK CLEARANCE

LEICESTER STORE ONLY

(EXCLUDES WATCHES & BESPOKE)

25 LOSEBY LANE
OPEN FRIDAYS & SATURDAYS
UNTIL 20TH DECEMBER

Poets' Corner

A dedicated space for celebrating poetry from across Leicester and Leicestershire

MEGAN LUPTON

Grief is a funny thing.
It's an early frost in late summer;
It's a cold draft you cannot place.

I ignored it, at first,
That silent, creeping shadow.
Until my home became a winter's midnight.

Then Grief wrapped me in a blanket
And said, "I know it hurts,
But loss is love with nowhere to go."

"If you'll let me," Grief said. "I can show you."
With a needle and golden thread,
Grief weaves you into the patchwork of my life.

Now, I can smell you in egg custard tarts.
I hear you in rock'n'roll; I see you in fields of horses.
I feel your hand in mine across the aeroplane aisle.

You see, Grief is a funny thing.
But from the chill of winter, spring flowers bloom.
And in the pain of losing you, I find joy in loving you. ■

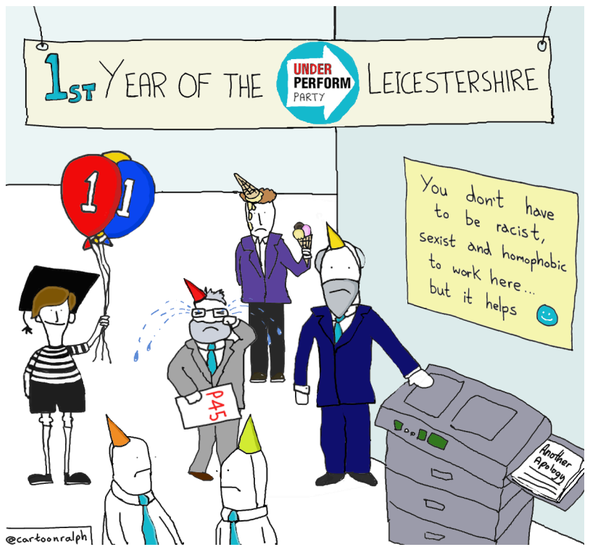
About this poem

I wanted to explore grief through poetry after losing my grandma. She was born in Leicester, growing up Kerrial Road (New Parks) then moved to Wilnecote Road (Braunstone) where she married Grandad and had Mum. When Grandad lost his job, they moved to Warwick Street (Fosse), where Grandma had my aunt. In the mid 70s, the family moved to Ratby.

Send your unpublished poetry to info@leicester.news for a chance to be featured in the next issue of the newspaper.

Opinion cartoon

RALPH UNDERHILL


1ST YEAR OF THE UNDER PERFORM PARTY LEICESTERSHIRE
You don't have to be racist, sexist and homophobic to work here... but it helps
11
PAYE
Another Reshuffle
@cartoonralph

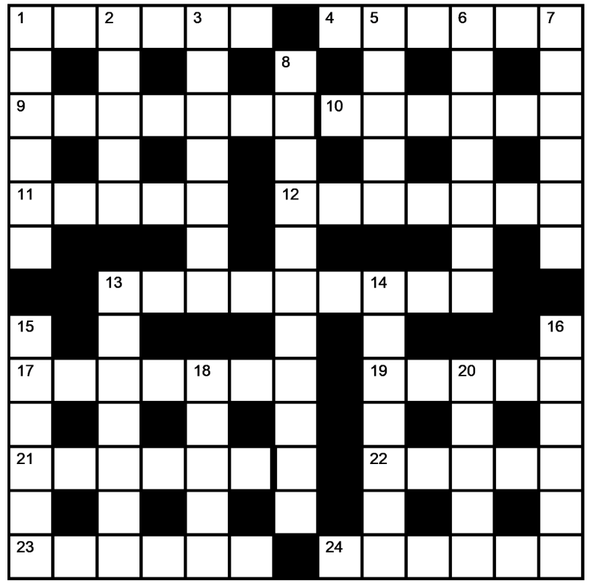
1st year of the 'Under Perform' party Leicestershire

Puzzles

FYN RAILTON-MILLER

Quick crossword

Fill in the blanks using the clues below



Down

1 Abduct (6)
2 Defining feature of Leicestershire Reform councillor (5)
3 Jetlag (4,3)
5 Done to a guitar and chicken (5)
6 Revived by Jesus (7)
7 French president (6)
8 Leadership of three (11)
13 2024 Trump fate (7)
14 One of two for Sizewell C (7)
15 Grant, eg power (6)
16 Remove, surgically or geologically (6)
18 Millennial pooch (5)
20 Influence government (5)

Across

1 Super-pooch (6)
4 State protection for refugees (6)
9 Ringos' role (7)
10 Type of SSRI (6)
11 Mechanism of eutrophication (5)
12 Experience (7)
13 2025 'threequal' ailment (9)
17 Money, colloquially (7)
19 Improvise (5)
21 Teetering (2,4)
22 Fibula's sister (5)
23 Common domain, phonetically (3,3)
24 Pattern of clothing, Scotland (6)

SOLUTIONS
FIND ALL PUZZLE ANSWERS HERE →

Sudoku

Use digits 1–9 once per row, column, and 3×3 square

8		9				2		
			7				6	5
				2	1		7	
6		4	1			9		
		3						
9							3	
1					8		5	
7		8		4	5			3
	6			1	2			

Wordsearch

Can you find the famous Leicesterians hidden in the box horizontally, vertically and diagonally?

ARMITAGE (Richard)
ATTENBOROUGH (David)
BRAG (William Henry)
CAMPBELL (Alastair)
CURRY (Tony)
GREY (Lady Jane)
HESKEY (Emile)
ILLSLEY (John)
JOHNSON (Thomas Hasting)
LINEKER (Gary)
LORD (Jon)
MERRICK (Joseph)
MONTFORT (Simon de)
MORRISON (Mark)
WALKER (Henry)
WALLACE (Alfred Russel)
WYGGESTON (William)

C	A	M	P	B	E	L	L	S	V	F	Y	R	T	Z
H	B	G	M	F	D	J	O	H	N	S	O	N	X	V
E	D	G	R	W	T	T	I	A	W	G	L	O	R	D
S	A	T	T	E	N	B	O	R	O	U	G	H	N	B
K	S	L	B	N	Y	T	F	M	C	J	Y	O	T	R
E	S	N	L	W	S	N	Z	I	V	U	T	M	Y	A
Y	W	E	N	A	B	M	L	T	Y	S	R	E	K	G
H	J	F	U	L	N	Y	H	A	E	P	L	R	N	G
L	N	W	A	L	K	E	R	G	A	S	D	Q	Y	Y
U	I	E	F	A	J	W	G	E	L	W	A	Y	I	X
W	F	N	V	C	G	Y	T	L	T	X	G	U	N	R
D	L	G	E	E	W	S	I	V	E	D	R	S	E	E
N	X	C	I	K	M	O	N	T	F	O	R	T	D	B
C	G	U	P	S	E	M	O	R	R	I	S	O	N	R
K	F	Z	M	E	R	R	I	C	K	P	E	X	G	R

LEICESTER GAZETTE

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